

The place of young women

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ON June 16th Major Liu Yang blasted off in the Shenzhou-9 space craft. At the age of 33 she became the first Chinese woman to travel to outer space. (A young girl in Gansu province, and a rank of all-women soldiers, watched her go.) Even as Ms Liu hurtled skyward, photographs of another young woman, [Feng Jianmei](#), began circulating on China's microblogs. The graphic pictures, taken by her family, show Ms Feng lying on a hospital bed next to the body of her seven-month-old fetus, as she was left after local family-planning officials ordered her doctors to forcibly induce a miscarriage. Though the case sparked widespread outrage, this week there are reports that Ms Feng's husband has disappeared after the couple became the subject of locally orchestrated reprisals.

Ms Liu stands as an example of one of the most significant trends in China today: the emergence of a new generation of women, educated, ambitious and successful, who are playing pivotal roles in

the country's economic and social development. Ms Feng's sad fate might remind us that even still they struggle against old-fashioned attitudes and the capriciousness of the state.

Women such as [Zhang Xin, Yang Lan, Zhang Lan and Peggy Yu Yu](#) rose from improbable, and sometimes quite humble, backgrounds to become influential and wealthy businesswomen. Their stories of self-made millions have in turn inspired other women to believe that hard work and perseverance—as much as a good marriage—can be a ticket to success. While men still dominate the ranks of the uber-rich, China is remarkable for the number of women who regularly appear on [the annual list of China's 400 richest individuals](#).

In sport, Chinese women [excelled in the rankings at the 2008 Beijing Olympics](#), considerably outpacing their male teammates in total medals. The [ineptitude of the national men's football side](#) is a much lamented topic of conversation among Chinese fans. The Chinese women's team by contrast has advanced to the quarter-final round of the World Cup four times since 1991. It even reached the finals once, in 1999, before losing a heartbreaker to the Americans on [Brandi Chastain's iconic tournament-clinching penalty kick](#).

But even young women who are neither millionaires nor world-class athletes are taking advantage of new opportunities. This is particularly true of those fortunate enough to live and work in China's booming mega-cities.

Kate Ba is in her late 20s and works at a public relations firm in Beijing. While men might still wield a lot of the power, says Ms Ba, more women are rising through the ranks and they are not afraid of pursuing their own career goals. “My generation are just now starting to become managers, and in the future I think we'll see more women as presidents and CEOs, far more than in my mother's generation.”

With careers and jobs of their own, many women enjoy a financial independence unheard of in prior generations. Their higher earning potential brings them a greater say in family decisions and in choosing their own goals.

Changing demographics are another source of new opportunity. According Yang Yuli, who works as a producer for the BBC in Beijing, in the past parents' extreme preference for having sons would meant fewer resources were available for the education of daughters. (Sons were preferred in part for their role in staying on to care for their ageing parents, while daughters were compelled to

marry into their husbands' households.) Now, in an age of only children, if a family's one child is a girl, parents have little choice but to groom her for long-term success. As Mr Yang has it, "it no longer matters if you are a boy or girl; you are the only person responsible for [your] family's future."

Zhao Ning, an educational executive who just had her (first) child, agrees. "Girls no longer have to compete with male siblings for their parents' attention when it comes time for critical decisions about investing in a child's future or education."

For many years now female high-school students have done much better than their male classmates in the *gaokao*, China's highly intense and competitive [college-entrance exam](#). In 2004, just about half of the *zhuangyuan* in each province were women. (It's a term which refers to the highest scorer on either the humanities or sciences test and dates back to the imperial exam system.) Since then, however, the number of female *zhuangyuan* has grown steadily, topping the men in every year since except 2009. In fact, from 2006-2008 women accounted for more than 60% of the top scores by province. More and more women [matriculating at China's top universities](#) each year, though women are still the minority at the postgraduate level.

Success begets new challenges. Most striking is the impossible mission of striking a balance between career and family. Even in more developed economies, whether women can "[have it all](#)" or not is a subject of perennial debate. As elsewhere, working mothers in China struggle to find time to care for their own children, husbands and sometimes elderly parents too.

Ms Yang, of the BBC, argues that as only children, daughters are now facing many of the same pressures to land squarely on sons, including the need to find a livelihood capable of providing for their parents' retirement.

Those women who do want to start a family can find it difficult to break out of the newfound career track. Many women complain that the more successful and financially independent a woman becomes, the harder it can be to settle down. This prompts the fear of becoming a [shengnü](#) or "[left-behind woman](#)".

According to Ms Ba, who recently married her longtime boyfriend, there is a stark difference in attitudes towards marriage one finds in larger cities, like Beijing, and the cities and towns of China's interior, where older attitudes persist.

“The traditional idea is to find a guy who can take of you,” says Ms Ba. “But in a bigger city—like Beijing—you can find a partner and grow together so that you don’t have to depend on him. Women here want somebody who can help them achieve their goals and support them, not just feed them.”

For Josie Wang, in her mid-20s and also working in Beijing, there’s more to finding the right partner than just property and practical affairs. Half of her friends see it the same way. “I still have friends who are looking for a guy to take care of them, but that’s changing. Now it’s like 50-50 with more and more of my friends saying they can look after themselves just fine,” she says. “Especially those who have been educated abroad; they feel it’s important for a man to respect a women’s independence.”

Ms Ba adds that some men still have trouble accepting a woman who has established herself in a career or makes more money than her potential groom. They avoid women who might outshine them. (This has not stopped men complaining about the number of *baijinnü*, literally “gold-worshipping women”.)

Other, older problems are even more serious. Many women working in China experience sexual harassment and discrimination based on gender or marital status. Retrograde attitudes clash with the desire of young women to be able [to express themselves without being harassed](#).

Despite all the challenges, new and old, Ms Ba remains optimistic. “More and more women have their own career and their own ideas and this is going to continue. Society and husbands will have to adapt. There is no going back.”

(For a longer discussion of women in today’s China, listen to [this special edition](#) of the Sinica podcast, with Mary Kay Magistad of PRI’s “The World” playing host.)

(Picture credit: AFP)

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